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SUBJECT: PRELIMINARY INFORMATION ON THE IRANIAN DIASPORA
COMMUNITY IN AZERBAIJAN (C-TN7-00225)

REF: STATE 031483

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Classified By: Ambassador Anne E. Derse for reasons 1.4(b) and (d)

11. (S/NF) Summary: According to the Azerbaijani State Migration Service, the Iranian diaspora community in Azerbaijan numbers approximately 10,000 and is made up predominantly of ethnic Azeris, Talysh and Persians. Despite the appreciable number of Iranians living in Azerbaijan, especially in the capital Baku, there are no significant diaspora social, cultural, religious, business, or political organizations, let alone leaders, who enjoy a large following. A number of groups claiming to represent the interests of "southern Azerbaijanis" have offices in Baku, but appear to have little support among either the Azerbaijani or Iranian communities and are heavily monitored by Azerbaijani and Iranian security services. The Islamic Republic of Iran (IRI) maintains a large presence in Azerbaijan and, operating out of Iran's diplomatic posts and cultural centers, keeps a careful eye on the diaspora community, including the 700-800 Iranian students resident in Azerbaijan. Although some prominent Azerbaijani opposition politicians have adopted the cause of "southern Azerbaijanis," there appears to be little coordination between these politicians and the somewhat fractured "southern Azerbaijani" diaspora groups with offices in Baku. Neither the Iranian nor the Azerbaijani government seems willing to allow the explosive unification issue to derail bilateral relations. End summary.

An Overview of the Iranian Diaspora

12. (C) According to the Azerbaijani State Migration Service, the Iranian diaspora community in Azerbaijan numbers approximately 10,000 and is made up predominantly of ethnic Azeris, Talysh and Persians. Despite the appreciable number of Iranians living in Azerbaijan, especially in the capital of Baku, there are no significant diaspora social, cultural, religious, business, or political organizations, let alone leaders, who enjoy a large following. This lack of non-governmental, organized activity is likely due to heavy government scrutiny, both in the IRI and Azerbaijan, as neither government is keen on separatist agitation in its respective country. It is also important to note that the vast majority of Iranian ethnic Azeris, both in Iran and Azerbaijan, consider themselves to be Iranians first, ethnic Azeris second.

13. (SBU) While the majority of Iranians living in Azerbaijan are not politically active, a number of organizations claiming to represent the views of Iran's ethnic Azeri community have emerged. Founded primarily by ethnic Azeri refugees or assylees now living in Europe and North America, these organizations are motivated by a strong desire to see "South Azerbaijan" reunified with Azerbaijan. Of these groups, the most significant in terms of size and influence include the World Azerbaijanis Congress (Dunya Azerbaijanlilari Kongresi) and Southern Azerbaijan National Awakening Movement (Guney Azerbaijan Milli Oyanis Herekati). Headed by Dr. Javad Derakhti (an ethnic Azeri holding Swedish citizenship), the World Azerbaijanis Congress claims to have 6,000 members active in 14 countries. Similarly, the Southern Azerbaijan National Awakening Movement, headed by Professor Mahmudali Chehraganli (an ethnic Azeri now living in the US), claims to have an active membership numbering "in the thousands," also active in over 14 countries. Also claiming to represent the views of Iran's ethnic Azeri community, GunAz Television (GunAz is short for Guney Azerbaijan or South Azerbaijan), a Chicago-based satellite station operated by Ahmad Obali (an ethnic Azeri and naturalized US citizen), is also a player in the ethnic Azeri movement (although GunAz Television's influence is hotly debated both in Iran and Azerbaijan).

14. (C) All three organizations maintain resident offices in Baku and have supported small-scale actions to include protests at the Iranian Embassy, usually demanding greater cultural autonomy for Iran's ethnic Azeris. These groups have largely failed to seize the initiative and transform their passions into a political movement in either Iran or Azerbaijan. "Unification" is a politically charged issue in both countries, and Azerbaijani and Iranian security services keep a careful eye on "southern Azerbaijani" organizations in both countries to ensure they do not overstep political

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bounds. The groups also seem hampered by a lack of coordination. Despite frequent international conferences and other mobilization efforts, no one organization or leader of the 20-plus organizations all claiming to represent the interests of Iran's ethnic Azeri minority has emerged.

15. (C) A handful of influential Azerbaijani opposition politicians have seized upon the ethnic Azeri issue in Iran, attacking the Aliyev government for not speaking out more forcefully on the behalf of their ethnic brethren in Iran. Long associated with and sympathetic to Mahmudali Chehraganli and his South Azerbaijan National Awakening Movement, Isa Gambar of the Musavat Party and Ali Kerimli of the Popular Front Party have reportedly provided moral, financial, and media support over the years. (Gambar's Yeni Musavat newspaper frequently runs stories sympathetic to the plight of ethnic Azeris in Iran.) Another opposition politician, Etibar Mammadov of the Azerbaijan National Independence Party, has also been a supporter of the ethnic Azeri movement, organizing and hosting the September 2006 "National Movement of South Azerbaijan" conference in Baku. Ultimately, however, the issue of Iran's ethnic Azeris has yet materialize into a political movement, let alone serve to unify Azerbaijan's divided opposition.

16. (C) By far the largest Iranian diaspora group with virtually any organization in Azerbaijan is the Iranian exchange student population. Represented predominantly by ethnic Azeri and Persian students, the Iranian exchange student population is relatively small, estimated at between 700 and 800 students. (Armenia, in contrast, hosts an Iranian student population in excess of 3,000.) Motivated primarily by an interest to escape the rigid academic and political conditions in their home country, Iranian exchange students studying in Azerbaijan do not appear to favor any one university or academic discipline.

17. (S/NF) SIMO reporting suggests that the Iranian

intelligence apparatus closely monitors this population. Despite efforts by the Baku Iranian Cultural Center to organize an Iranian Students Association and compel membership, this effort does not appear to have gained any traction. Cognizant of Iranian intelligence scrutiny, Embassy contacts report that most Iranian students prefer informal student networks that maintain contact by email or mobile telephone text messaging. (We are not aware of any student newspapers, websites or blog sites.) Anecdotal evidence suggests that the fears of Iranian exchange students do not appear to be unfounded; according to a number of Embassy contacts, Iranian intelligence has reportedly stepped up its monitoring of the exchange student population, a large influx of male exchange students - most often in their late 20s and early 30s - having started studies in the first-year programs of a number of local universities in the past year.

The Iranian Official Presence in Azerbaijan

¶8. (C) While the activities of the Iranian diaspora community in Azerbaijan are at best disorganized and sporadic, the same cannot be said of the IRI's official presence in the country. Staffing its key diplomatic and cultural center postings with ethnic Azeris, Iran's diplomats and cultural affairs officers have undertaken a very active and effective public relations campaign in Azerbaijan. Focusing their efforts primarily on influencing the Azerbaijani populace, Iran's diplomats ruthlessly exploit any opportunity to show the US - or Azerbaijani western integration efforts - in a negative light. Iran's former Ambassador to Azerbaijan, Afshar Suleymani, was a formidable presence in the Azerbaijani media, often appearing on Azerbaijani television stations and always speaking in Azerbaijani. Iran's new ambassador in Baku, Naser Hamidi Zare, also an ethnic Azeri who previously served as Iranian Consul General to the Azerbaijani exclave of Nakhchivan, is a lesser known quantity, having kept a relatively low media profile during his tenure in Nakhchivan.

¶9. (S) Also operating out of Iran's diplomatic posts and cultural centers, Ministry of Intelligence and Security (MOIS) and Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) operatives reportedly focus their efforts on monitoring the Iranian ethnic Azeri community, exploiting media and other tools to present the Islamic Republic of Iran (IRI) in the best possible light, and attracting young Azerbaijanis to

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visit or study in Iran. They also keep close tabs on the activities of Iranian exchange students and any cultural and political groups active in issues affecting Iran's ethnic Azeri community. Bonyads such as the Imam Khomeini foundation also serve to advance Iranian interests, but reportedly focus their efforts primarily on Azerbaijan's large refugee and internally displaced persons population (providing aid, educational, medical, and religious services). The Baku branch of Iran's Melli Bank (the only branch office in the Caucasus) provides the financial support necessary to facilitate cultural and other activities. We are exploring the role Melli Bank and Azerbaijani banks play in facilitating the transfer of remittances between the diaspora community and Iran.

¶10. (C) The Iranian government, rather than diaspora groups, dominates Iranian broadcasting in Azerbaijan. Enjoying favorable (mountainous) terrain and a vast array of powerful transmission and jamming towers located along the 432 kilometer Iranian-Azerbaijani frontier, Iran's primary broadcasting effort comes in the form of Seher Television. Broadcast in the Azeri language, Seher Television is capable of reaching nearly every major Azerbaijani population center, to include Baku. The Azerbaijani exclave of Nakhchivan with its 179 kilometer shared border is especially vulnerable to Iranian broadcast efforts; Seher Television and at least eight Farsi-language stations are broadcast daily. Beyond

its television and radio broadcasting efforts, Iran also employs internet blog sites, first appearing during the Sanat controversy, when Iran seized upon an allegedly anti-Islamic article published in a Baku newspaper. To date, the Embassy is not aware of any Iranian outreach efforts involving the use of mobile telephone text messaging. The IRI actively jams inbound television and radio broadcasting, to include Voice of America's Azerbaijani-language broadcasts (the "spillover" which Embassy contacts report can be picked up by Iranians living in the inter-border region).

Complex Relations and other Limitations

¶11. (S) Comment: Given the high degree of government scrutiny - both Iranian and Azerbaijani - applied to the Iranian diaspora community, as well as the intense government pressure not to allow the "unification" question to derail bilateral relations, Azerbaijan's significant Iranian diaspora community plays an understandably quiet role in public affairs. The mostly ethnic Azeri community's ability to seamlessly blend into Azerbaijani life also makes it hard to pinpoint its activities, social groups, or financial activities. We will continue to explore the questions raised in reftel and will report further information as available. End comment.
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